

Ambrosia

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/30357495) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/30357495>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Video Blogging RPF
Relationship:	Clay Dream/GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF)
Character:	Clay Dream (Video Blogging RPF) , GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) , Alexis Quackity , Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF)
Additional Tags:	Enemies to Lovers , Chefs , Alternate Universe , Cooking , how did i end up here , they're soulmates your honor , bottom george lol , Top Clay Dream (Video Blogging RPF) , Hotel Sex , Smut , Porn With Plot , Oneshot , Anal Sex , god i hope no one finds this , dnf week baby , this is embarrassing , but like it's also really good i think , please read it i'll fall in love with you probably , dream is arrogant and it's attractive , there are like food metaphors? , i dunno , lol
Language:	English
Collections:	DNF WEEK 2021
Stats:	Published: 2021-03-30 Words: 12754

Ambrosia

by [coffeequartz](#)

Summary

Day 2: Enemies to Lovers

.....

Culinary college rivals Clay and George left their bitter youth two years ago as they integrated into adulthood, sought positions to further a career in cooking, and most of all, vowed to forget about the respective counterparts that made each other's lives miserable. The unofficial commitment is forced to change, though, when a prestigious job offer reunites the two at a swanky hotel bar, ignited with attraction and unable to hide from the misgivings of their past. As twin flames rediscover their similarities, a single phrase rings true:

Hate looks an awful lot like love.

Notes

HI

so i wrote a one-shot of dnf week: day 2 (shh i'm late, don't tell anyone) and then it became really long for some reason and also this is my first time actually posting smut so ahh lol but i dunno i hope u guys like it :) it was fun to write, at least!

PRIMDISE, the creator of DNF week! - ur amazing, thank u for organizing this

also - i just wrote smut about two minecraft youtubers becoming rival chefs in college. how did we get here

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

“I’ve seen it all, try me.”

The woman across from George smiled, garnet lips twisting into an expression that glimmered with cautious approval. She looked down, running her gaze along the stack of papers adorning the oak desk that separated the two. A clear denotation of power, a reminder of who was in charge and who wasn’t.

“Well, the faculty at *Le Bernardin* certainly values confidence. And, your resume shows that you *do* have much to be confident for.” The woman tilted her head, a strand of auburn hair coming free from the tight bun at the nape of her neck as she considered the blunt list of accomplishments carefully printed in George’s portfolio.

He had spent hours on that resume, manipulating the font and vocabulary until an air of determined professionalism seemed to seep through the ink. He’d run through mock interview after mock interview with Karl after promising to pay for a breakfast of bagels and espresso, practicing responses to any questions that may surface in the conversation until every syllable of his answers felt encased in concrete, unmoving and self-assured. He’d even spent hours in the dingy kitchen of his apartment, splattering yellowing walls and popcorn ceiling with batter and smoke until he perfected his signature aniseed-almond meringues that he brought to his meeting in an unassuming tin, hoping to brighten the taste buds and attitude of his interviewer.

Because this was fucking *Le Bernardin*, a restaurant, no, a *culinary staple* of New York that George had fawned over as a young, bright-eyed student, scanning prestigious articles that demanded praise and respect for the establishment. The aromatic seafoods, golden lighting, and distinguished attendees were the stuff of legends, elevated on the esteemed shoulders of James Beard awards and Michelin Guide ratings. George couldn’t even afford to taste the food he was now vying to create.

And yet, he was *here*: enclosed in the ornate paneling and dark wood that juxtaposed his too-tight blazer and ten-year-old dress shoes severely, as though he was the unfortunate result of bad photoshop. The woman in front of him was clearly experienced, worn through from her years at the restaurant to become the pinnacle of professional genius. It was difficult for George to imagine her in his position a lifetime ago, beaten down from exhaustion and debt and criticism, but still aflame with the hunger for a chance to see the top. To fraternize with the elites and bathe in the glory of success, of triumph.

George had worked hard, so hard, to get to this moment. Crawling his way up the pecking order in school, barely sleeping so he could read and reread recipes before his technical exams, sporting the dark circles and prominent ribs that demonstrated his determination proudly. He didn’t come from money or prestige, but by God, he would make his own.

“Let’s see...” the woman murmured, oblivious to George’s woes as she continued to flick through his portfolio. “Hm. Top of your class at Tante Marie Culinary Academy, a short internship at *Clos Maggiore* before moving overseas, and some stunning references from chefs I know personally.”

Her umber gaze flicked to George's with a fresh sort of approval, as though she finally saw the unbridled talent he hid beneath a silver tongue and a guarded expression.

"Oh, and how could I forget the exquisite meringues! It's not often that potential employees bring me gifts." The woman gestured to the tin that sat idly between them, ruby lipstick slightly less vibrant from indulging in the powdered desserts. George shot back a confident smile, hoping the tangle of nerves was buried deep enough in his stomach to avoid her probing stare.

"I'm glad you like them. I hope that I would be given the chance to bring more interesting flavor combinations and textures to the plate, if, of course, *Le Bernardin* chooses to consider me." George dipped his head, hands clenching and unclenching under the desk as he fought to keep his knee from bouncing.

The woman offered him a knowing smile, brushing non-existent specks from the crisp lines of her uniform and indicating that he should stand. "You certainly present a compelling case, Mr. Henry."

George allowed a thin strand of hope to sneak through his chest before he shoved it down, afraid of the fall from grace that he would endure should he rejoice in this small success. Expecting failure was better than being ripped away from anticipatory victory, of that he was sure.

"Thank you so much for meeting with me," he offered instead. "I am honored to receive this opportunity, even if it doesn't come to fruition quite yet. Is there a time I should expect to hear from you about a decision?"

The woman nodded, walking to the thick oak doors that bookended the office and leading him through. "Yes, you should receive an email tomorrow morning informing you of your status, as our pool of potential employees is quite small."

"And," she continued, "you're very welcome. *Le Bernardin* is committed to supporting young chefs in their improvement and experience in the culinary arts as well as absorbing modern ideas to our kitchen. You know, that's how I got my start." She smiled, a softer pull of red, the first hint of personality to shine through the stiff taglines that had no doubt been fed to her by the higher-ups of the restaurant.

"Well, anyway, it seems that our time is up. Thank you for your submission to our staff." The woman cleared her throat, walking back to the grandiose desk as George moved unsteadily into the adjoining hallway. "Oh! I nearly forgot... Mr. Henry?"

"Yes?" George questioned, backpedaling to where he could see her fingers tapping as she flicked through notifications and made notes on her laptop.

"I had another candidate coming in for an interview after you. He should be in the lobby right now... Would you mind sending him in?"

George cringed internally at the request, unable to help the swarm of self-doubt that buzzed against his eardrums. Another candidate, and she was setting them up to deliberately meet? He knew firsthand that it was much less trouble for her to just dial the number of the front desk and make them inform the interviewee, as she had done with him.

But the challenge in her gaze, the glint of craftiness in her ebony eyes, made him bite back any sort of comment and nod dutifully, wishing the woman a final goodbye before making his way back through the maze of gold-adorned hallways and into the quiet cacophony of the lobby.

Despite the hum of patrons and waiters, it was easy to pick out said candidate. He wore the same hunched shoulders and bouncing knees that George had tried to suppress, and much to George's distaste, carried a similar container of something that looked tiny and delicious. The man's face was turned away, but money could be bet on the likelihood of an expression lost in anxious mutterings.

George crossed the crowded room with a sigh, already resenting the man for his comparability to his own persona. He knew it was unfair, but George felt irked that his prideful sense of uniqueness had been replicated by this stranger. No one, he was sure, deserved the position as much as himself. No one could match the blood, sweat, and tears spilled on stained cutting boards and tattered recipe books throughout his time training for this moment.

"Hey," he said, trying (and failing) to stifle the bleed of exasperation in his tone as he reached his counterpart. "They want you upstairs for the inter-" George's words fell flat, wilting on the edge of his tongue as the man turned his head morosely, exposing a face George knew well, so well, *too* well.

Skin unfairly tanned even during his stint in the U.K, freckles as light as powdered sugar brushed against his nose and cheeks, jaw ticking in the way that it often did when he was upset, dirty blonde hair mussed against his forehead no matter what he did to try and gel it.

The man looked like he was having a realization of his own, raking stormy green eyes down the length of George's body, eyebrows pushing together as he came to terms with the absurdity of the situation.

"*You?*" was spat in unison, and the venom lacing the words plucked George from where he stood, thrusting his mind to two years earlier, the final semester of his practice at Tante Marie Culinary Academy, the worst of his rivalry with *him*.

"Hey! Clay!" George said, storming across the lawn, across grass that must've been green once, but had turned a sickly shade of yellow during the colder months. "Yes, I'm talking to you, asshole!"

The man in question pushed off from where he leaned against a looming oak tree, his movement quieting the hum of chatter throughout his circle of friends. Clay had that effect on people, a presence so captivating that a shift in his mood was like a shift in the weather, and right now, storm clouds gathered.

"What now, Georgie?" he smirked, eyes glinting as though lightning had spiked across the roiling green. George reached his conglomeration of friends, but didn't stop a few yards away from his nemesis as he normally would. No, he was bold this time, or maybe just too angry to enforce his usual boundaries. Instead, he got in Clay's face, thrusting a finger at the taller man's chest as a red tinge swept itself across the bridge of his nose.

"You ruined my fucking soufflé," George snapped, too infuriated to care about the titter that went through the group at his words, "I know you did. Because I know that I preheated my oven to 400 degrees, but by the time I checked it again to take it out, it was at 425. Do you know what that does to a soufflé, Clay? It fucking burns it!"

For once, Clay was speechless. A rarity, and it seemed to quiet the chuckling of the students around him just a little bit. Even Nick, his relentless sidekick that was practically willing to take up arms just to defend Clay's non-existent dignity, faltered. Sure, they both messed around all too

often, and yeah, Clay took the rivalry way too far most of the time, but George had never been this angry. His discontent was usually expressed in biting quips, scathing expressions, and a dirty knife or two left carelessly on Clay's counter just so he would incur the wrath of their instructor who insisted on a clean work station at the end of class.

But George never yelled.

"You're lucky that my béchamel sauce was so good, Chef Devereaux didn't even notice." George said, and for a second, it looked as though he would turn away. Leave Clay with the next move in their stupid little game, toss him a final scowl before sauntering off to grovel at the feet of the school's faculty, the teacher's pet he was.

Clay leaned back against the willow tree, ready to turn to his friends and badmouth the man in animated whispers that he would surely be able to hear across the lawn. It was their routine, their push and pull, their tradition that made everything else feel just a bit more tolerable. In the four years of their ruthless competition for top of the class, it had always been this way.

So, to say he was surprised would be an understatement as George whipped back around and pressed even closer to Clay's body.

"No, you know what? This is fucking ridiculous. Yeah, I hate you and you hate me, whatever. But sabotaging my fucking dish? That's far, Clay, and you know it. What kind of asshole does that shit and thinks it's funny? That it's some sort of twisted prank? You're... you're terrible."

By this point, the playfully charged atmosphere had dispersed entirely, leaving Clay cold and uncomfortable as laughter died throughout his friend group. Alex, George's closest friend, had made his way over to the confrontation and was desperately trying to diffuse the situation, taking George's arm and whispering something about how it wasn't worth it, Clay wasn't worth it, he was better than this. Out of the corner of his eye, Clay saw Nick shrink back, his arsenal of insults void as silence settled thickly.

But Clay wasn't one to take that lying down.

No, fuck George for thinking he could pull some sort of sympathy card and sway his entire circle of friends. Fuck George for trying to pull a twisted semblance of guilt from Clay, act like the stupid soufflé prank was crossing a line. And most of all, fuck George for being so close to him, fuck the way his mouth breathed hotly against Clay's, fuck the sheen of crimson staining the bridge of his nose, fuck the hand that was still pressed against Clay's stilled chest.

Yeah, Clay wouldn't be letting that train of emotion survive the fuse he was about to spark.

He lifted his body so that he loomed his full height, consequently pressing further against George and reveling in the way his expression faltered.

"You're so cute when you think you've done something. Guess what, Georgie? A soufflé that burns in an oven 25 degrees warmer just makes it a shitty soufflé. And how come it wasn't 'too far' when you hid my cilantro last week? Or what about when you filled my dish soap with maple syrup?"

The humor was back, the stifling presence of uncertainty lifting as Clay found his voice and turned it into a knife. Was he pushing it? Maybe, but that seemed to be a common thread of their rivalry lately. And if so, he was far from caring, much more intent on wiping the satisfaction from George's stupid face, putting out the fire behind those ebony eyes.

"If it's too hot, George," Clay said, dropping his voice to a rumble and basking in the snickers

emerging from his friends once again, “then get out of the fucking kitchen.”

Sunlight drew gray arcs across the lawn, wispy clouds having overcast the confrontation. It made George’s already alabaster skin look sickly, thin and brittle from his late nights in the kitchen perfecting a recipe. His russet gaze glimmered, not of tears, but of anger. Of distrust. Of a true severance of a bond, whispering look what you’ve done into Clay’s stony smirk.

“Fuck you.” George spat, nose wrinkled, petals of red flushing his skin in fury.

Clay didn’t even have to think to bite back, disregarding the playful filter he usual ran his insults through as raw, untapped emotion bled euphoric hatred into his lungs.

“Yeah? Bet you wish I would.”

For the first time, Clay saw fragments of hurt slice through the layers of anger on George’s face. His snarl dropped, replaced by a disbelieving frown. And, much to Clay’s shock, he felt it in his own chest, the stabbing realization that maybe he really had gone too far.

George stepped back, and Clay missed his warmth.

And he noticed, then, how much their rivalry had evolved. It had begun with equal fire and intelligence, Clay’s American brashness and charisma garnering attention while George’s silent concentration earned him respect. It started with colorful barbs and scathing glances to disguise the fresh anxiety every first-year possessed. It commenced with competition that looked an awful lot like a challenge, like a dare, like a game played with nimble fingers and saccharine smirks.

And they had grown like that, developed into seasoned university students with personalities that were inextricably tied to one another. They learned what made the other tick, became acquainted with each other’s weaknesses and extrapolated them into school-wide jokes.

But somewhere along the way, things had changed. George started to notice the way Clay cracked his knuckles rhythmically when he was nervous, and found the disgusting feeling of fondness stick against his sternum at the thought. Clay began to watch for when George would pull the left corner of his bottom lip between his teeth when he was reading a recipe, and was horrified at the endearment flushing his cheeks. Their relationship, once fraught with red-hot irritation and sugary satisfaction, had started to wade into dangerous territory. They were crossing a line, one that was impossible to recover from.

As George walked away from the crowd by the oak tree, Alex muttering quietly to him as gray sunlight bent across his bowed back and misty eyes, Clay had a terrifying thought that left his mouth dry and head spinning.

Hate looks an awful lot like love.

“What are you doing here?” Were the words that drew George to the present, permeated with raspy irritation.

Clay had stood up, exposing the annoyingly tall height he was so prideful of, and was looking down at George with an unreadable frown marring the placid emerald of his eyes. George swallowed, the position threatening to send him back to memories of Clay’s dominating figure sneering from above him, mouth twisted as he prepared to spit out any number of insults.

George stepped back.

“I had an interview to cook for *Le Bernardin*, one that they graciously *invited* me to do,” George said, trying to inject some of his earlier confidence into his statement and hoping the disbelief in his face wasn’t too obvious.

“Oh yeah? Well they asked me to interview too, so you’re not as special as you think.” Clay smirked, crossing his arms, characteristic smugness evident in the way his lips pulled and his brows furrowed.

“I know, asshole, that’s why I came up to you. They’re ready to meet with the next candidate. But,” George said airily, examining his nails, “the woman told me that there was a strong possibility *I* would be selected. Sorry to burst your bubble. Maybe they’ll let you wait tables?”

Clay bit out a laugh. “Yeah, well, clearly they haven’t met me yet. I’m sure she’ll be singing a very different tune by the time I’m done. Nice to get your hopes up, at least.”

“I’m glad to see your ego is as inflated as ever.”

“Oh, that’s just my charm, Georgie.”

“You know, you’re going to be late.”

“Then stop distracting me.”

“God, just piss off, will you?”

With one final grin and nudge to George’s shoulder, Clay sauntered down the hallway, container in hand, previous anxiety completely melted away.

It was disconcerting, George thought, how easily they fell back into their scathing rhythm, how little it took for Clay to rile him up. It seemed that time did not heed their age-old rivalry, forever cementing the animosity they felt for one another.

One thing that *had* changed, though, was the rush of adrenaline that used to always burn through George’s veins after a confrontation with Clay. Despite the sharp words that were exchanged, the sweet euphoria was void, leaving George ice-cold and tired.

Yes, George was tired.

And maybe it was because in the two years that he had spent cooking under various chefs after culinary school, embracing humility and realizing his inexperience, the arrogant competition with Clay no longer felt valid. Maybe, upon venturing into the world of adulthood where rent and electricity and groceries became regular implementations of reality, he stopped seeing the importance in a juvenile rivalry.

Maybe George had simply grown up.

Nevertheless, the smug glimmer in Clay’s eyes that had always driven George crazy no longer seemed so bad. His rumbling laughter had stopped grating against George’s nerves, and just felt like, well, laughter. He had moved on from the childish antagonizing he partook it (mostly), and the thought felt liberating.

So, with a final sigh, George left behind the lavish upholstery and dim lighting of *Le Bernardin* and flagged a taxi, tiredly reciting the address of the hotel that the restaurant had graciously put him up in for the night.

A hot shower and a drink in solitude would be a heavenly relaxant to the tight muscles in George's neck, the perfect way to forget about the bizarre reunion with Clay and focus on the potential job.

Though, thinking about that no longer quelled the pool of anxiety in his gut. Because George was up against Clay, now, and despite never admitting it, he was a damn good chef. An eye for plating and a taste for unique flavor, George had struggled significantly to keep up with him in the kitchen. And now that he had to compete with the charming articulation Clay was so well known for, his confidence had effectively blown away with the New York breeze.

Great. George sighed, letting his head fall back against the cracked leather of the taxi. With any luck, today would become a distant memory as he either immersed himself in the bustle of being a chef at *Le Bernardin*, or he looked onwards for a new job. *Clay* would become a distant memory, of that he was confident.



“Whiskey sour, please.”

The bartender nodded, walking to the edge of the counter and leaving George to stare into the amber flames crackling somberly in the brick fireplace.

Despite the bustle of the hotel, the comings and goings of poshly dressed patrons and concierges chatting with eager New York tourists, the bar felt eerily bereft of energy, as though a fog had muffled the noise around the mahogany tables and glass bottles. Only a few others occupied the stools and leather chairs of the joint, wandering souls swallowing bitter liquid by the mouthful to disguise the wounds of their past.

George felt a sort of kinship with them despite his youth, ghosting a smile at the thought as the bartender stuck an orange peel on ice and slid him the drink. He nodded thankfully, sliding a few bills across the scratched countertop and sighing into his glass. The sour taste pricked his tongue, sliding unevenly down his throat and coiling in his stomach. George appreciated the sensation. It grounded him, reminding him of why he was here, in New York, practically prostrated in front of *Le Bernardin*. It wasn't for show, it wasn't to become ensnared in his tumultuous past, and it certainly wasn't for Clay.

He was here to recognize his academic efforts and project his culinary personality, if his dream restaurant would have him. Nothing else, no one else.

Of course, this was the optimal time for an all too familiar raspy voice to enter the mist of the bar, dragging in sunlight and warmth as his presence settled right next to George. A deep exhale and a low chuckle, lit with the fire of a thousand suns.

“I should've known you were staying here,” George said, swirling the last sip of tangerine liquid in his glass with an internal groan. Now was *not* the time for more shallow banter. He'd come here to be alone, but at the sound of Clay's jacket sliding off his shoulders, he knew wouldn't be getting that any time soon.

“Why *wouldn't* they put us up in the same hotel?” Clay's voice punched through the light haze of alcohol, replacing the smoky taste on his tongue with bitter irritation. George could feel Clay shift beside him, raising his hand to signal the bartender. “A Manhattan and a refill for him, please. Put it on my tab.”

George finally dared to lift his gaze, raising an incredulous eyebrow at the man next to him. Clay had changed clothes, like George, discarding his dress shirt and pants and opting for dark jeans and

a fitted shirt that looked surprisingly put-together against his toned figure. His hair, a fine-spun honey blond in it's characteristically messy state, caught the saffron rays of light from the overhead chandelier, spilling gold down his frame. He looked hauntingly angelic, smile glinting sharply like the glass in George's hand.

It startled George, the direction his thoughts were heading, and he looked down again. Better to avoid, hide, keep the cards close to his chest around Clay. Be demure in the way he was explosive, because George couldn't handle sharing any more similarities with the captivating man.

"What inspired such charity from you tonight?" he asked dryly as the bartender placed a fresh whiskey sour beaded with condensation in front of him.

Clay shrugged, letting his Manhattan dangle from long fingers, "I dunno. Feeling generous, I guess."

George flinched, always expecting the caveat to Clay's kindness. "Is this your way of telling me you got the job?"

"You know they won't officially inform us until tomorrow," Clay laughed, taking a leisurely sip.

"Really? I was sure your *charm* would have earned you an exception."

Clay's jaw tightened, though his smile remained easy, "You flatter me."

"I don't intend to."

George knew he was being difficult. He could see the way Clay struggled to reign in his lashing tongue, pulled out his thin wallet, positioned his body to seem defenseless and friendly. He understood that the man was making an effort, understood that he had probably changed over the past two years as much as George did. But there was a part of him, maybe the fragment of his college self, that *wanted* to make it a challenge. He'd never before let Clay's domineering personality topple his own quiet sarcasm, and he wasn't about to start now.

"You've certainly grown up, George, but in some ways, you're exactly the same," Clay said, his words taught but expression still relaxed. George acknowledged that even in truce, their relationship might always be slightly strained. In some ways, that was what made it interesting. "For one, you've still got quite a mouth on you."

George frowned. "Your ego is still unfathomably large."

"You haven't stopped biting your nails," Clay shot back.

"You still can't do your hair properly."

"You," Clay breathed, leaning forward, smelling of bitter alcohol and warm sugar, "are still too pretty for your own good."

The words cut straight through the addled film of George's mind, biting harsher than the sour orange of his drink ever could. He recoiled, moving away from the confectionary lilt of Clay's voice, even if all he wanted to do was tip closer and know *exactly* what he meant by that.

"W-what?" George said, shocked to find his voice thin and weak, the opposite of his self-assured chef persona he'd tried to melt himself into over the years.

"Oh come on, George, it's not like that's a secret," Clay said, leaning and back and stretching his

arms above his head with a tired grunt. George kept his gaze trained on the man's verdantly sparking eyes and definitely *not* the lean muscles in his arms that strained with his movement.

"I don't... what are you talking about, Clay?" George asked, tone perhaps a bit too defensive for someone that had just complimented him (supposedly). The comment was unbelievably surprising, so odd to see spilling from the lips of his arch-nemesis, and it left little room for bashfulness. George was only suspicious.

As if reading his mind, Clay grinned, "Just because we hated each other didn't mean I was blind."

Hated. Hated. Hated.

Past-tense. Like Clay didn't hate him anymore. George shook away the thought, still stuck on the unexpected flattery, slowly becoming overwhelmed by the caramelized words falling from Clay's normally abrasive mouth. George felt as though he'd woken up in some alternate universe, one where his rival actually had the patience to have a drink with him in a bustling New York City hotel. It was surreal.

George rubbed his forehead, the ghost of a headache pinching at his temples. "Clay, this is just so... unexpected. You actually making an effort, I mean. I don't get it. Sure, you were a tyrant back at Tante Marie's, but I was equally awful. Remember that time when I rubbed garlic onto your cutting board when we were making blackcurrant panna cotta?"

George meant to sound indignant, hoped that his reminder would prod all of the distaste from Clay's suspiciously composed expression. It was like biting into a jalapeno and waiting for the spice to hit the back of his throat. Constantly on edge, constantly expecting the worst.

Clay paused for a moment, eyes flitting as he searched his mind for the memory. Then, much to George's bewilderment, he laughed. Loud and wheezing, possibly exacerbated by the second Manhattan that he was currently sipping from.

"Oh my god, I remember that. Chef Devereux was disgusted," he chuckled fondly, possibly recalling how their instructor had made him stay after and do the dishes from every workstation. George had been exceptionally proud of himself that day. "Do you remember when I stole your keycard and locked you outside of your dorm for, like, two hours?"

George exhaled in a sharp half-laugh, "Of course I remember. We had a technical that evening that I wanted to study for. I was so fucking mad at you. God, my hands were freezing by the time you gave it back."

George didn't understand exactly why he'd joined in on the amusement. If anything, he should have still been furious at the way Clay's friends had spit-balled jeers at him from inside the dorm, threatening to go through his stuff while he shuffled to keep warm. It was one of the many times where Clay's pranks went a bit too far, sparking hurt from George instead of fury.

But it had been two years, and in that period, George had gotten locked out of his apartment courtesy of his own clumsiness too many times to count. He'd accidentally used a stained cutting board that reeked of spice and flavor in several embarrassing instances. Maybe, in the distance between him and his godforsaken culinary school, he'd realized how insignificant their rivalry really was. Nothing more than schoolyard taunts and juvenile jokes, hardly worthy of a grudge.

Their precarious friendship extended, there in that hotel bar as smoke and citrus bit the roofs of their mouths. They tossed stories to one another, debating the merit of various pranks and comparing their careers since that turbulent time.

Clay, it turned out, had moved back to America shortly after George, taking a position as a pastry chef in a popular Long Island joint and slowly moving up the ranks. He had quit months earlier after beginning to feel stifled, like the unique visions of his recipes were cast aside in favor of the widely-appreciated classics. He accepted the offer to interview at *Le Bernardin* in hopes to share his unique culinary palette, and maybe own a restaurant of his own one day. He was young, though, he acknowledged, and he had a lot to learn before he was ready.

The humility exuding from his words struck George. It was something that had always been lacking in the man's vocabulary, and was part of the reason he had drawn George's unfavorable attention the moment they arrived at Tante Marie's. George had never considered that his arrogance could've just been a front, a way to hide the insecurity that he *knew* lined the ridges of Clay's attitude.

What was even more surprising, though, was the likeness of their pasts as they navigated the aromatic streets of New York City. George had also left his chef position not long ago, afraid of becoming too pedestrian in the ever-changing culinary atmosphere of the city.

"You know," he said, startling Clay from watching the melting ice cubes of his drink glimmer against the amber light of chandelier, "we're much more similar than I would have preferred."

Clay barked out a short laugh, "Is that an insult?"

George shrugged. "I just always thought we were quite different. It's part of the reason I felt we hated each other back at school."

"An observation, then."

"I suppose," George conceded, avoiding Clay's searching eyes to pick at the orange peel still resting deflated at the bottom of his glass. "But a positive one. I'm starting to realize you're less of an asshole than I thought you'd be. Then I thought you *were*."

Clay hummed. "I'll take it. Why *do* you think we were so irritated by one another, then?"

It was a question George had been wondering as well. Sure, Clay was overly cocky and George was unnecessarily sarcastic, but those qualities didn't make people *despise* one another, at least in the way they used to. He thought for a moment, sifting through his past, the person that he'd become, watching a time-lapse of his actions in his mind's eye.

"I think..." George began, throat working to push out the most honest version of his words, "we both saw each other as perfect canvases for our own self-doubt."

Clay snickered, though George didn't miss the way his fist clenched around his glass. "Wow. Profound," he said dryly.

"I'm serious!" George exclaimed, now confident in his tentative psycho-analysis. "I- well. I was struggling quite a bit to come to terms with my, er, sexuality, in that time. And you were so, I don't know, *self-assured* in everything that you did. I didn't think it was fair. I suppose I was jealous."

George surprised himself by letting the confession spill from his soul, a truth he had been hell-bent on hiding from Clay. Their old dynamic would have ensured such information to be used as ammunition, piercing George's fragile shame. Just as he went to try and correct his admission, thought, pass it off as some unfunny joke wrapped in one of his classic biting remarks, Clay spoke.

"Maybe you're right, then. You know, I was unbelievably insecure during culinary school," At George's skeptical smirk, he continued with a laugh, "It's true. All I really cared about was staying

popular and keeping my friends. And then you came along, all content being by yourself, respected without having to *try* like I did. Maybe I was jealous, too.”

It was silent, for a moment. The bar was slowly filling up as the night grew dark, the clinking of glass and slide of liquor becoming louder against promising heat. Both men seemed stunned by the honesty of their words. Briefly, George entertained himself with the thought of their younger selves seeing them, civil and smiling, shoulder-to-shoulder with amicable drinks in hand. He wouldn't be surprised if twenty-year-old George fainted at the image.

“To think,” Clay said finally, sitting back, “if we had just had a productive conversation years ago, it would have saved a lot of ruined dishes.”

George laughed, finishing the dregs of his whiskey sour and sighing at the taste. “I don't know about that. I'm still rather hung up on the fact that you called me *pretty* .” It was meant to be a joke, a harmless tease, but the way Clay's smile lifted told him otherwise.

“And I would've meant it.”

“And you would've meant it,” George repeated faintly. Maybe it was the alcohol, or maybe the dim lighting, but for whatever reason, a comfortable haze started to sink hot blades into his gut. Clay's silver tongue had *always* annoyed him, but... it was quickly starting to draw George in.

He wanted to hate it.

“And this,” Clay said, brushing his hair out of his eyes and leaning forward, “is when you compliment *me*, George. As you've noted, I have quite an inflated ego that needs tending.”

George scoffed, overwhelmed by the sugary smell of Clay that surrounded him. “Oh, fuck off. You know you're attractive.”

“Do I?”

“You said it yourself. Massive ego, and all that,” George smirked, flicking Clay's temple.

It was a harmless gesture that quickly turned volatile when Clay caught his wrist, dragging it to his chest and leaning even closer. George was stunned, the effervescent green eyes across from him pinning him in place.

“I'll never get tired of hearing it from you,” He whispered, dark tendrils penetrating his words.

“Clay, I don't... what are you *doing* ?” George felt like he was missing something, like he was two steps behind whatever conclusion Clay had arrived at. But the way he was touching him, the way his grip had tightened imperceptibly around George's wrist, left little room for thought as baffling arousal started to trickle through his veins.

Twenty-year-old George *really* would've passed out by now.

“I don't know. Do you want me to stop?” Clay's eyes were fire, white-hot flames bleeding at the edge of emerald irises.

It was surreal. It was dumbfounding. It definitely wasn't appropriate, as George lounged in the ritzy hotel paid for by his potential employer. But still, he shook his head.

That was all Clay needed.

Slapping a few bills on the light oak counter and nodding stiffly at the bartender, Clay pulled George out of the shadowy atmosphere of the bar and back into the lobby infiltrated with a golden glow. The light was disarming, almost prompting George to pull his wrist from Clay's grasp and demand an answer. Demand to know what the hell had shifted in the mind of his old rival, cause a scene until he got the explanation desired.

But lust, hot, heavy, and disarming, turned his muscles to jelly. The most he could do was follow Clay into a grand elevator laden in gold, glass walls closing around them as he punched in a number and tugged George to his chest.

Despite Clay's clear advantage in height, he managed to rather skillfully press his lips to George's jawline, wet and warm. The unexpectedness of his action caused an embarrassingly loud gasp to emit from the shorter man's throat as molten lava like he had never felt before coursed down the slats of his ribs.

Clay only smirked against the skin of his throat before nipping roughly, moving his mouth down to George's pulse point and sucking a mark into the flesh. He slowly trailed his lips up, spurred by the heavy breaths of the man beneath him until he reached the crease of George's ear and bit, hard.

"I never hated you," Were the words mumbled into soft skin, husky with barely maintained control.

"What?" George whispered, too caught up in sharp sensation to fully comprehend what Clay was saying.

"I never hated you. Ever. I regret what I did in school, but at least it got you to look at me. *Really* look at me, like I actually meant something to you. I'll get you to do it again." Clay punctuated his words with a push to George's pliant shoulders, pressing him against the door of the steadily-moving elevator and shoving a knee forcefully between George's.

"You could've- you could've just asked," George groaned, breathless with the absurdity of the situation but too far gone to care.

"Hmmm," Clay mumbled against the column of his throat, scraping teeth along the sensitive path and making George squirm fruitlessly beneath him, "what would be the fun in that? You should know better than anyone else that I love a challenge." His knee pressed forward, and George keened.

The memories he was slammed back into were ones he had desperately tried to forget about, horrifying recollections of the weaker moments in his years as Tante Marie's.

It was a constant source of conflict between George and his roommate, Alex.

Sure, George valued his privacy, but being alone all the time while one of his only friends continued to schmooze women in the local pubs, eventually convincing some pretty blonde to go back to her place and spend a night between the sheets, arriving back at the dorm in the late hours of the morning while George was already long-gone for classes? Yeah, that wasn't fun. Solitude was only a welcome reprieve to an extent. It walked a line between loneliness that George had no interest in experiencing, not to mention leaving him with the constant responsibility of chores and laundry while Alex partied his money away. It was probably what they fought about most.

That said, George was infinitely grateful for his friend's absenteeism in this moment, writhing on

his bed, hand buried beneath his boxers, panting and struggling to keep his eyes open.

It had all started earlier that morning, in Chef Deveraux's plating class, as George dutifully took notes on the art of freeze-dried flowers and tried to ignore the muffled giggling of Clay and his friends in the back of the class.

George had been in a rare bout of happiness, probably brought on by the annoyed lecture of their instructor that had not happened once, but twice to his amused enemy for disruptive behavior. Satisfaction permeated his gut as he dug through his backpack for another stick of lead. All things considered, it was going to be a good day.

That notion went out the window fairly quickly when a light pressure hit the back of George's head and landed on the linoleum floor next to him. It wasn't a stretch to assume that the wadded ball of paper had come from the impossibly tan hands of Clay. George ignored it.

A minute went by. Another projectile hit him in the back of the head, but this time, a scratch of pencil buried beneath the folds of paper was obvious. Curiosity outweighing his desire to make Clay huff in annoyance, George snatched up the two objects and hid them in the folds of his notebook.

The most recent ball was crinkled with a messy scrawl that said: goddamn, read the note george. George had to hold in a self-satisfied smirk at Dream's obvious exasperation lest Chef Devereux wonder what the hell was so amusing about the landscape plating technique she was currently explaining.

The second piece of paper, though, erased the smug look from George's eyes instantly, leaving him red-cheeked and irritated beyond belief: u look hot today.

With an expression frozen in shock, George turned in his seat slowly, only to be met with the cocked eyebrow and self-assured grin he himself had been sporting just a few minutes ago. It was impossibly annoying, the way Clay could read George like nobody else and figure out how to skim his long fingers along every one of the other man's buttons.

Annoying and terrifying, because it nudged unfairly close to the truth George hid beneath piles of work and diligent notes, the taboo gender of his attraction.

George turned back around, a scowl resting on his face for the remainder of class, even as the students claimed workstations and practiced plating the delicate cuts of lemon kolaczki they had baked the day before. Not even the buttery tart George knew he'd perfected when he tasted his dish dissolved the discomfort low in his stomach, the twist in his throat, the perpetual flush of his cheeks. He felt utterly moronic, being so affected by a sentence scratched in horrible handwriting, but here he was. The most he could do was wait for class to end and properly confront Clay, make sure he knew that he wasn't the comedian he thought himself to be.

George got the chance when the class was released, a flock of uniformed students making the collective trek across the sprawling campus lawn as people headed to their dorms or the mess hall. George was surprised when he spotted Clay alone, for once, leaned against a pillar of the school's dated pastry building and typing furiously at his phone. Encouraged, he beelined it to the man, only stopping to shake the dusty flakes of powdered sugar from his shirt and swiping an assuring hand along his forehead.

Clay barely had time to react before George was in front of him, face twisted in irritation and arms crossed as he cleared his throat with as much posterity as he could muster.

"I would appreciate it if you stopped throwing those idiotic notes at me. I know Nick made you write them. Fuck off, before I report you to Chef Devereux for a disruptive attitude." A fruitless threat, and both students knew it. Their game was too high-stakes to quit now, pride becoming the driving force for the lack of intervention. Still, George couldn't help but dangle the illusion of power in the same way his rival would never be able to resist prodding at George's faltering demeanor.

But Clay only smirked, clicking off his phone and watching the glare of the sun as it melted like butter into crisp blue with infuriating calmness, "Nick didn't make me write that. No one did."

"So you decided to be an asshole all by yourself."

"Yep." Clay said, popping the 'p'. Boredom seeped through his words, though George knew better. The sheen in his eyes suggested he was very much engaged in the conversation, even if he didn't act like it.

"Well. Glad we got that cleared up, but my request stands. Fuck off." George crossed his arms tighter, wary of the amusement in Clay's face that historically never meant anything good.

"I was being serious, you know. You do look hot today." Ah, so this was how he planned to assert his win. Unfortunately for their bitter standoff, and much to George's chagrin, he would be lying if he said the twist of Clay's lips wasn't affecting him, even if he tried desperately to maintain his neutral expression.

Clay leaned forward, an earnest fire leaking into his gaze. George scoffed, hoping to clear the waver in his voice as he spoke, "Go to hell, Clay. Your twisted sense of flattery is fucked."

And in the uncannily divine timing of the universe, right as George managed to compose himself and prepare a multitude of insults to slice from his tongue, this was the moment when Clay decided to dart his thumb out, quick and warm, resting it just under the fullness of George's bottom lip. He dragged the digit along stunned skin, the tip of his finger just barely grazing George's parted mouth, his touch feather-light yet eerily commanding.

Then, as fast as it had appeared, it was gone, and Clay had popped said thumb between his own lips, licking off something invisible as George just stood there. Absolutely shocked. Absolutely aroused.

"You had powdered sugar on your face," Clay offered, oblivious to George's plight. "Mm. Sweet."

What. The. Fuck.

Needless to say, that derailed train of events had gotten George to where he was now, gasping against his pillowcase and resting his free hand on the junction of his lip. Where Clay had touched.

And it was humiliating to be so affected, but George was simply too out of it to care as he tightened the hand beneath his boxers and keened, long and drawn-out, imagining it was Clay's grip pumping under the sheets and not his own.

With a final jerk, he came, groaning weakly as warmth coursed down his fingers, thighs quivering. An orgasm unlike one he'd ever given himself, and it threatened to ruin him. He continued to stroke the dying flame singeing his gut until the pleasure of overstimulation bordered on pain, then eventually sat up to clean off his hand and stomach coated in shameful stripes of white.

Glancing at himself in the bathroom mirror as he ran the tap, lips bitten red, hair mussed, and chest still heaving, George finally found it in himself to care about what he'd just done. Sure, there were men on campus he occasionally allowed himself to fantasize about, letting his mind and fingers wander into dark waters, but Clay was not one of them. As a cardinal rule, Clay had always been off-limits.

George bowed his head, trying to control his breathing. An unexplainable spike of hatred hit him hard in the sternum as he scrubbed his hands, animosity for the man that forced him to pleasure himself just because he thought it would be funny to adulate his enemy for the day. It wasn't funny, and George vowed to prove that to him tomorrow, in class. Reassert his control in their back-and-forth.

Still, he simply couldn't deny it: he was unbelievably grateful that Alex hadn't been home this time around.

"I thought about you," George gasped, mind shoved mercilessly back to the present where Clay continued to greedily lave at the marks on his neck, sliding long fingers against his ribcage.

"Oh yeah? Tell me," was growled into his ear, and normally George would be embarrassed. Normally, he would barely be able to fight the desire to smack the self-satisfied smirk from Clay's sugary lips, normally he'd understand the implications of what they were doing.

But, in typical Clay fashion, he had managed to reduce George to a feeble flame of *want*, like the blue tips of fire as a stove crackles to life. When his teeth grazed a point just under the crook of the panting man's jaw was when the last of George's restraints fell from his body like shackles of stone and ice, and he allowed himself to scrape at Clay's biceps while words tumbled, smoky and sinful, from his lips.

"*God*, I wanted to hate you, but it was impossible when you looked at me like you *knew* what I was thinking. When you touched me, barely, and I *couldn't*..."

Clay's groan, honey-like in the way it dripped from his mouth into George's ear, sent blissful shivers down his spine and hot blood determinedly south. The elevator dinged, leaving hardly any time for George to shift his weight before the bronze doors were hissing open and the pair was stumbling into an extravagant hallway echoing in opulence.

"If we had gone to *my* room," George huffed, allowing Clay to pull him across the rows of arching windows and lush greenery, trying to count with hazy eyes the room numbers nailed to the doors, "this would've been much faster."

"Shut up," Clay said breathlessly, finally reaching an entrance labeled *404* and fumbling for his key card from his pocket. It was so utterly *bizarre*, what they were doing, but the never-ending pool of arousal burning his mouth and torching his trachea made it impossible for George to find the wherewithal to consider the risks of fraternizing with his arch-rival. He only wanted *more*.

However, in the agonizing way Clay *still* hadn't managed to steady his shaking fingers enough to slide the card through the reader, it didn't seem like George would be getting the impending satisfaction as quickly as he needed.

"Oh, fuck you, open the fucking door," he gasped, pressing trembling lips against the curve of Clay's shoulder blade from behind and willing for some goddamn divine intervention just so he could relieve the horrible ache in his trousers.

Clay whirled around, eyes hard as jade, jaw ticking with enough of a metronome to wither the stinging protests that almost came spilling from George's lips.

"Just for that," he hissed, pulling George by his collar until their bodies were pressed together once again, "I should fuck you right out here. Bet you'd enjoy it, too."

George desperately wanted to bite back. To throw out some insult that would quench the burning smugness in Clay's expression, remind him exactly who he was talking to. But somehow, the dark edge to the taller man's words made it nearly impossible to hold back a groan, and instead, he choked.

Clay smirked.

It was infuriating.

Luckily, before things could turn from heavy lust to outright arguing, the door swung open behind Clay, as he apparently had managed to swipe the card while George sputtered indignantly below him. With a firm hold still on his collar, it was all George could do to follow Clay's destructive path into the stagnant air and yellow glow of the hotel room.

It looked almost exactly like his own, save for a slightly messier suitcase haphazardly strewn with clothes that Clay had clearly tried on and then discarded, as though his casual demeanor was actually a careful construction of nonchalance. The thought made a devilish bout of confidence course through George's heaving body once again. Sure, it was obvious his counterpart was trying to maintain the upper hand in their sinful engagement, clearly hoping he could find a comfortable facet of power to have over his old nemesis. But George wasn't like that. George wouldn't simply just *take it*.

After all, like the man had said, what would be the fun in anything without challenge? Neither of them operated under compromises or kindness, and maybe that was what made their relationship so explosive. Maybe that was why, after all this time, the thought of one another still burned impossibly bright in tandem with arousal.

"Aw, Clay," George chuckled, toeing off his shoes with a franticity that didn't match his voice, "did you get all nice-looking for *me*?"

George should've known the implications of his words when silence was his only response. He should've expected something more than a rebounded remark, coming from a man as capricious as Clay. Nevertheless, he was utterly shocked when strong arms lifted him from behind, tossing him onto the white duvet as though he weighed nothing. Which, compared to Clay's abnormal height and taught muscles, George supposed it felt like he didn't.

"What-" he tried to exclaim, though he barely had any time to react before Clay was crawling onto the bed, prowling between George's legs, pulling his own t-shirt off of burning skin and- *oh*.

Clay was hot. Obviously. Conventionally attractive in the way his dirty blonde hair was always messily haloed against the sun, how his tanned skin exposed the barest dusting of freckles, when his jaw clenched and a line of shadow cut itself across his throat. So, it wasn't a stretch, and it was *hardly* a surprise, that such an allure continued past Clay's neckline.

And still, George wasn't remotely prepared for the braid of muscle and hue of caramel adorning the chest of a now-shirtless Clay, caging his body against cream sheets stained in heady darkness and golden lamplight. It made him want to return the amethyst marks carved against his own skin, do the same to the man on top of him until a pretty kaleidoscope of bruises marred the perfect

canvas.

But Clay's ego was already exceptionally high, and George's ability to form a coherent sentence was dangerously low. Ergo, a feeble "damn" was the only thing to part his lips as Clay smirked above him, all-knowing of the chemical euphoria that fizzled against George's neurons when his own shirt was pulled off of his body, hair mussed and skin flushed red.

"Damn?" Clay murmured as he shucked his jeans from his body and settled with a tantalizing lack of pressure between George's legs. "Surely I'm worth more than *that*."

George stifled a gasp, watching his composure slip through his own parted fingers as Clay unraveled him, bit by bit. "I don't think it's wise for me to compliment a narcissist."

"You'll manage," Clay hummed, his only warning being the dig of fingers into George's exposed hipbone, "or you won't get anything at all."

George examined the man above him. The self-assured words he spoke were so different from the flush in his cheeks, the blow of his pupils, the *red* that outlined his body in unrighteous glory. George wanted to devour him, or maybe let himself be devoured. Either way, he was dying to *taste*.

"Kiss me," George tried breathlessly.

"Ask nicely."

And God, it was like Clay was *begging* to be strangled. If it weren't for George's compromising position and revealed lust, maybe he would've. But there was no room for protest when Clay alone held the power to make him feel as good as he desired.

So, George unfurled his words: "*Please*, Clay."

He could've kept going. Possibly thrown in a "*I need it*" or something equally whiney, but Clay's already precarious strings of self-control seemed to snap rather quickly when George finally submitted himself, just a bit. *Good to know*, he thought before the man above him descended and all wisps of cognition were completely wiped.

Clay, to put it simply, tasted of everything heavenly, a divine ichor that George longed to bottle and sell for a fortune. It was a medley of spiced wine and October plums and dark chocolate melted over a double burner, notes of grapefruit lightening such a sinful tongue. It was rose petals laid thin and sugary over demanding lips, the warm crumble of shortbread, syrup seeping into flushed skin. A palette so intoxicating, and it was all for George.

They drank each other in like they were compensating for the years of wasted breath. Touch between them had always been so brutal, dehumanizing with arrow-like words and scowls lit aflame with hatred, but they kissed as though they were apologizing. As though reparation could be communicated through skin and not sound.

Clay ran his tongue along the cut of George's teeth, eliciting a groan from the man beneath him. George dragged blunt nails down the ripples of Clay's back, and a heavy exhale of pleasure bled humidity into the room. Their push and pull was hazardous in the same way it was addictive, and neither person could look away.

And then Clay's hand was traveling away from the jut of ivory hipbone he had been bruising, repeatedly running a single finger over the intersection of cloth and skin that was George's waistline. A simple action, a light tease at best. But a raw sensitivity had permeated the air of the hotel room, and George couldn't hold back a gasp as Clay trailed circles along his navel.

“Fucking get *on with it*, ” George demanded, though the breathiness in his voice betrayed his assertion. The hand of his that wasn’t latched firmly to Clay’s neck moved to the sheets, fisting the fabric so tight that he had half a mind to wonder if it would rip.

Clay tsked, and the sound sent waves of torture through George. “I’m not sure if you’ve noticed,” he spoke, the lilt marred in arousal, “but I have a thing for manners. You should really use yours.”

“Clay, you’ve got to be shitting me.”

George’s stomach muscles twitched as a single finger slipped below his waistband, hardly able to control the jerk of his hips. Clay kissed a teasing line down his chest, and it was as though someone had held a lighter to a trail of gasoline. He could hardly *think* with the constant promise of pleasure always out of reach.

“What do you want, George?”

“God, I... *please* touch me, holy fuck.”

A mediocre attempt, if he was being generous with himself. But clearly it was enough, as George felt the button on his jeans pop and the zipper be released with a grating slowness. Still, it was *movement*, and that was what mattered most when George was harder than he’d ever been in his goddamn life.

And then his trousers were gone, and George was straining against his boxers, caught between needing Clay’s lips pressed back against his own or getting the stimulation he desperately craved.

“Funny how you always acted like you didn’t want me, but... well.” Clay raised an eyebrow, tracing George’s covered length with a pressure akin to a draft of air. It was like he was *trying* to goad bratty quips out of the man beneath him, just so he could crush the complaints with saccharine words and brash dominance. He craved the temperance of their relationship as much as George did.

George, who was sure he was on the brink of *combustion* if he was denied pleasure for a moment longer. In a desperate attempt to silence his own scathing retorts, he pulled Clay to his mouth once again, melting at the confectionary heat that burst from their connection and hoping it would be enough to get the man moving.

However, he didn’t exactly expect *what* that would entail.

The moment lips met once again in fiery exultation was when Clay decided to thrust a hand fully beneath George’s boxers, wrapping around his cock and jerking fervently in a way that George was *wholly* unprepared for.

The result was a resounding moan vibrated into the kiss, pressed forward as George’s back arched helplessly off the mattress. The firm drag of Clay’s palm was nearly enough to unravel him, and he gripped at the sheets as though they alone anchored him to reality.

In some twisted fascination, the reaction only made Clay more determined.

His grip was unforgiving, pumping George with enough strength to send him reeling, combined with a clever hand that knew where to press fingers or twist a wrist in a way that would have George unabashedly groaning beneath him. The whole night had been steeped in steadily boiling sugar, the temperature rising notch by notch, and now both men were barely able to regain composure as the sickly sweet heat erased all other thought.

“Oh my *God, Clay* - ” George choked, stumbling over himself to chase the heat that built, slow and saturated with sucrose, layer by layer, in his gut. If he was in a more resound headspace, maybe he would’ve wondered why Clay was letting him rut into his hand with abandon, not pushing down his hips in a way that George knew he would’ve preferred. Maybe he’d be suspicious of the smirking lips pressed against his own, how his eyes glinted with domineering jade.

A fatal mistake; George should’ve known never to trust his enemy, rivalry long-forgotten or no.

It was just as Clay’s hand sped up, coating George’s cock in delicious friction that left him writhing. It was just as he felt the ledge of pleasure crumble beneath his feet, just before he went plunging into the depths of shadowed euphoria. A move all-too classic, and still all-too cruel.

“Holy *shit*, God, I’m- *Clay*, I’m gonna- ” George groaned, toes curling and white knuckles practically ripping the sheets.

And instantly, Clay drew his hand away.

It was like a cup of ice water had been thrown over George’s body, rudely extinguishing the flame just before it blazed out of control. He stilled, heels digging into the mattress and eyes flying open to land on an absurdly satisfied Clay, who kneeled over him, unashamed with his precum-slick fingers and glazed-over eyes. George belatedly attempted to finish the job himself, reaching a shaking hand down to his length, but was interrupted by a rude grip on his wrist which determinedly pinned it back to the duvet.

“Oh *fuck you*- ” George began, blatant aggravation clearing the haze from his mind enough so that he could properly chew out Clay and his stupid sense of superiority.

“Ah,” Clay shushed, placing a hand on George’s trembling thigh and seeming to revel in the way it jerked under his touch. “Move an inch, and you won’t be coming.”

“This is fucking *ridiculous*.” George shifted against Clay’s stare, twisting his expression into one of complete disdain.

Because *of course* it was ridiculous. It was hardly Clay’s place to decide when George could orgasm, act like he had some sort of masochistic control over the man’s pleasure. No *way* was this a turn-on. Definitely not. George had only been embarrassingly close to coming due to adrenaline, certainly not because of the knife-like way Clay stared at him as though he was a delicacy only to be seen and *tasted*.

“You say that,” Clay smirked, hand against his leg moving up ever so slowly, “but then you’re so *loud* when I touch you.”

As if to prove his point, agonizingly sweet fingers brushed against George’s twitching length, and the consequential moan that echoed through the dim room swept a flush across the cheekbones of both men.

“You’re an asshole,” George panted as his hips involuntary thrust upwards, hissing when Clay pulled his hand away and settled back on his knees again, “but I need you to fuck me *right now*.”

Clay cocked his head.

George found it in himself to utter a strangled “please”.

And then Clay was gone, rummaging through his suitcase for a clear, travel-sized bottle that George was too strung-out to question his possession of. The mattress dipped when he returned,

settling between George's bare legs once again with ease and leaning over the flushed body beneath him. A slick finger drifted downwards, tantalizing and coated in sin.

"Yes?" He whispered with uncharacteristic softness.

George's gaze traced the peak of his jaw, the bridge of his nose, the arch of his questioning eyebrow. The entire scene felt sheathed in glass, a thin sort of effervescence that drew candied rainbows from the otherwise dull lamplight. He imagined he was glancing into another universe, one where Clay was bent over him like this every night. Where stillness sliced the ambition in the man's eyes and created something akin to affection. Like a cleansing draft of water to follow spices and sweets with enough flavor to encompass galaxies. Briefly, he wondered where such sentimental thought had come from. Briefly, he realized he didn't care.

"Yes."

The intrusion felt foreign, at first. Cold and sharp in all the places George was warm. He inhaled, dragging his bottom lip between his teeth to regain sensation in areas other than his lower half, focus on the pricking of his palms and the flutter of his eyelids. The breath turned into more of a gasp, though, when Clay's hand began to move and lips cut kisses into his thighs. George shifted, knowing that despite the finger inside of him being much longer than his own, it still wasn't enough to deal with the problem resting hot in his gut.

"You can add another," He whispered after a moment, and Clay complied. A bruise was sucked devilishly low, distracting George as he was once again forced to accommodate a change in stimulation.

Clay's hand began to rock again, silky and slow and mesmerizing, and again, George lacked the stimulation he required. Sure, the smooth push of fingers coaxed the flame deep inside of him. It was certainly enough to drag the occasional whimper past stubborn lips, as much as he tried to suppress it. But he needed *more*, and it was starting to feel like Clay was purposefully keeping that from him.

"Clay, keep going."

Again, the man allowed it, even refrained from commenting on the demanding tone George knew he hated. He simply swiped enough lube onto a third finger and chuckled, diving back down to continue his devoted lavng to George's thighs.

And still- not *quite* right. George was growing impatient.

"Clay, come *on*." He huffed, jerking when teeth sunk faintly into his hip bone, already eager for the marks he knew he would see on himself the next morning.

"I don't know what you're talking about," was the only thing murmured against alabaster skin.

George tried his best to sigh, which sounded more strangled than he would've preferred. "Just-please. Haven't you gotten enough of your kicks for the evening?"

"Hardly."

"Clay," George groaned, partially from exasperation and partially from pleasure as the hand inside him sped up, ever so slightly.

"What, George? I don't know what you need if you don't tell me." Clay's smirk was *audible*, ringing with golden sugar hovering dangerously close to a flame. The fringe of his hair brushed

against George's abdomen, eliciting a dusky shiver from the man below him.

"Like, do you want this?" Clay asked innocently, cocking his head in thought before driving the once-languid fingers into George with enough force to leave him choking. "Or maybe this?" The digits spread slightly, cutting a burn across the overly-sweet sensation and driving a groan into the warm air.

"Oh, I know. This." Clay curled his fingers, pressing *hard* against that spot inside George that he was aching for, and those hands surely must've been coated in the nectar of the gods, because the reaction he got was glorious.

George arched, muscles clenching and grip tightening as a moan ripped from his mouth and shattered the cocoon of butterscotch that was sonorously soothing his mind. Back was the blade of pleasure, so hot it melted everything else in its path and only growing stronger.

"*Clay,*" he gasped, feeling as though candle wax had been dripped onto every one of his nerve endings while Clay ruthlessly stroked his prostate. The flush against George's neck only became darker, garnet replacing rose and words replacing breaths.

"Oh. So it was that."

"*Fuck you.*"

"Ah, you've reminded me." And the fingers were gone, but George didn't mind. It only meant he was one step closer to the fire building without care in their golden hotel room. He touched Clay like a child touched the windows of bakeries: greedily, entranced by the color and aroma redolent of ecstasy. The man above him only grinned, though the way he was frantically rolling on a condom and slicking himself with lube made George acutely aware of exactly how much he was being affected.

In no time at all, Clay had pushed George's thighs further apart and placed himself more securely in between, eyes glued to the panting mess below him. While obviously different in complexion, the crimson of both men made skin indecipherable from one another as they moved closer, tip brushing against entrance. George couldn't muffle the needy groan that slipped through his teeth.

Clay placed a finger underneath George's chin, forcing amber eyes to meet his own. "You want this. You like this. You like *me*." He pushed his hips against George's, barely.

"*Yes, fine Clay, yes. I do. Go, please.*"

And then Clay was inching forward, and George nearly forgot how to breathe.

He felt filled, no, he felt *completed*. Like an extension of himself he had latched onto during school was back, golden threads spooling them together to rebuild divine connection. It almost felt like they had done this before, the give-and-take so deviously natural. The taste of one another was heavenly, a transcendent medley burrowing deep into the folds of skin and soul.

Clay gasped out a request for assurance from George, and then began to move. His touch was like molasses and cinnamon, trailing down the heaving ribcage of the man he was inside of. Or maybe it was just his mouth, which groaned hot kisses against George's throat in time with the slam of the bed frame against the wall. It was almost enough to make him feel bad for the neighbors. Almost.

Clay shifted the angle of his hips and one of George's hands flew to his hair. He gripped hard enough to sting, throwing his head back as Clay found his prostate once again and wasted no time slamming into it.

“*Fuck* Clay, like that- yes, please,” The rough drip of his own voice sounded unfamiliar, like an unholy being had taken his body over and let him feel things he’d never felt before. Clay was certainly enjoying it, as his mouth only grew more frantic, and he moved it up to meet George’s gaze once again.

“God George, you’re so fucking *good*, holy shit, I can’t-”

And his lips, his *taste*. George wrapped trembling legs around Clay’s waist, free hand moving up to clutch at the headboard and moaning with abandon at the way his whole body rocked in time with every thrust. A determined tongue consumed his noises, licking the sinful sweetness off his breath.

George felt that he would shatter. Crack like hard candy, be utterly destroyed under the touch that was sending him in a thousand directions, yet somehow all aimed towards the sun. He felt his impending doom in the way Clay’s groans scraped against his eardrums, how his torso shook with the effort to keep overflowing pleasure from spilling down the edge.

“*Clay*, I’m- *please* let me, I’m gonna come, holy *fuck*,” George cried into the yellow night, knuckles white against the mahogany wood and sandy hair and praying to *God* that Clay wouldn’t draw him from his climax again. He didn’t think he could stand it, thought he would combust if he wasn’t able to release the overwhelming sensation building inside of him.

“*Fuck*, okay, eyes open, George. Eyes on me.”

George managed to lift heavy lids, meet the emerald stare above him just in time for his whole body to be seized in burning swaths of flame and euphoria. Crackles of pleasure encased his nerves as he came untouched in dizzying jolts of white. He yelled Clay’s name, and barely heard it. The shocks were too great, flavors too mind-numbing to fully taste as the man above him drove him through his orgasm.

Clay came moments later, gripping George’s waist with bruises on his fingertips and incomprehensible moans locking his jaw open, heat joining them as twin flames.

There they rested for a moment, honey pooling down bodies and sugar scratching discomfort into the position. But it was so rewarding to be so connected, a way for a thousand apologies to whisper against the brush of intimate skin.

Eventually, though, Clay lifted from the bed to cleanse the area and each other, despite the way his eyes were drawn magnetically to the drying fluids and beads of salty sweat. Still, George watched him gather towels and t-shirts for the both of them with an unexpected softness. And when it was done, they crawled under mussed sheets they hadn’t bothered to untuck, and rested forehead to forehead.

It was funny, the way they kept surprising themselves. Even after fucking brainlessly, there was still room for reparation. They *could’ve* passed it off as a one-night stand, George *could’ve* stumbled to the elevator to spend a fretful night between cold sheets. It was possible. Maybe it would’ve been for the best.

But he stayed. He allowed warm arms to curl around his own, let his head rest against a hard chest and smile at the sugar-spun stubble that tickled his temple. Candied light was replaced by the rich thickness of night, which settled across the consciousness of both men with the seductive whisper of *sleep*.

And so, basking in confectionary afterglow, they did.



George awoke to a particularly annoying ringtone. Wait, make that *two* particularly annoying ringtones, though George would stubbornly retract the adjective from the former, as it was *his own*.

His own.

He sat up, creaking open bleary eyes to settle against the warm wallpaper and golden paneling of the hotel room he remembered *Le Bernardin* put him up at. Morning sifted a welcome glow through the blinds, dipping the bed in melted butter that extended past George's body, across clouds of sheets, to the person next to him-

Oh.

Clay.

Clay, who was also resting against the headboard, rubbing his eyes and looking around for the source of the noise before his gaze centered on George. And even the unassuming *image* of him, flaxen hair mussed and freckles twisted as his brow wrinkled, sent sparks through George's chest.

An entirely different memory *also* reignited the feeble flame, but that wasn't the priority when the ringtones were getting louder and his boxers were tightening ever so slightly.

"Your phone is here," George muttered, avoiding Clay's blank stare, tossing him the noisy device, and pulling his own from deep under the covers. He flipped it over, checking the dimmed screen, and then promptly swore.

"What is it?" Clay grumbled, yawning and looking over George's shoulder even as tension brewed low under the covers.

"I think that was our- um. That was my reminder for when the *Le Bernardin* email would be sent," George choked out, the words spilling from tight lips as he navigated through the apps. An unopened message sat, taunting him with the delicate script of the restaurant in a *To: George D. Henry*.

Once glance to his left told him Clay was scanning the exact same notification, bent over his phone and looking vaguely unwell. The morning ruddiness of his cheeks had vanished, and George found that he missed it. He didn't like the mask Clay had pulled over those verdant eyes.

"Well, I guess, um, we open it, then," George tried, pulling the duvet tight against his hips.

"Yeah, I guess we do."

Silence. In an anticlimactic click, the emails were opened by unsteady fingers, eyes flicking across digital text to search for a '*we regret to inform you.*' Only one position, only one future. Seconds echoed dully throughout the room. Time drudged like molasses, encompassing the charged stillness of the morning light and dragging anxious scrapes across the men.

And then, in a simultaneous eruption of disbelief, the pair stumbled over each other trying to speak.

"Wait, we-"

"Does this mean that-"

“We’re going to be *working together?*”

End Notes

ahhhh! i hope you guys liked it!!! i'll be back to my regular High Tide chaps in the next few days, but we gotta support mcyttwt, yanno?

to anyone reading - thank you so much ahhhh!!!! u all are so nice and loving and it makes my day :')

of course, feel free to leave questions, comments, or criticism down below! everyone i talk to is so nice hehe

<3 Nev

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!